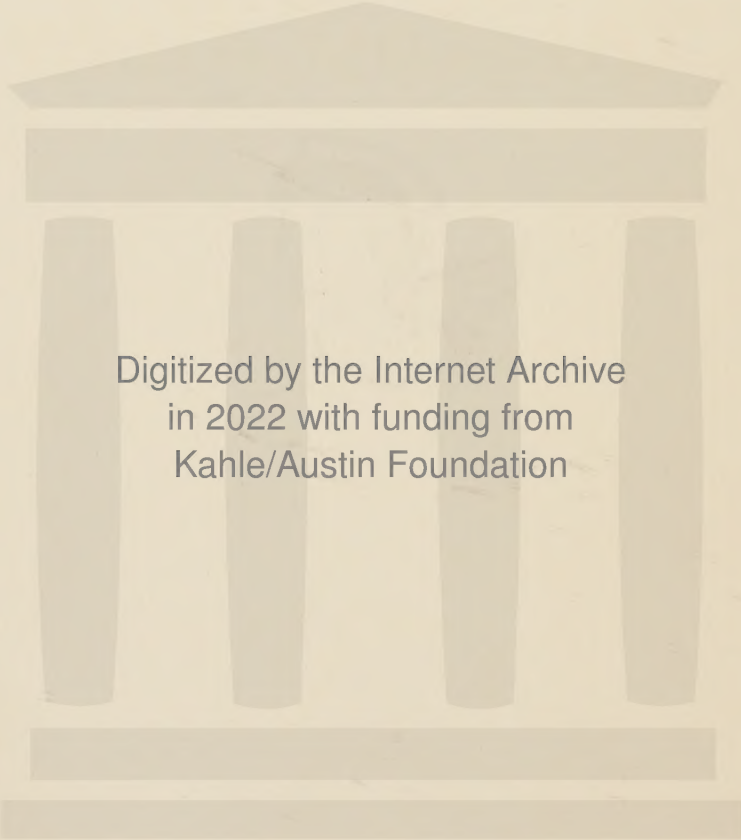




the Lost Halo







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the Lost Halo

A CHRISTMAS TALE

by HORATIO WINSLOW



SINCE THE SPRING OF 1728

FRANKLIN PRINTING COMPANY · PHILADELPHIA



WITH the approach of the Christmas season, that intangible essence within us, known as the Christmas Spirit, suddenly bursts its bounds, and we express it with a hearty "Merry Christmas, everyone! Merry Christmas to you!"

As a contemporary expression of that spirit, *THE LOST HALO*, by Horatio Winslow, is a masterpiece that deserves perpetuation not only by the printed page but in the hearts of all to whom "good will toward men" is a symbol of peaceful living.

We are grateful for the privilege of using this little classic as our Christmas remembrance to you, and it brings with it our sincere wishes for a most enjoyable holiday season.


FRANKLIN PRINTING COMPANY

December 25, 1950





1. HOW YE HALO, BOUNDYNGE OVER YE BATTLEMENTS OF PARADYSE, DROPPED INTO YE MYLKIE WAYE


BECAUSE he had barely reached his fifth aeon he was, as cherubim go, a very young cherub. And restless. That is how he happened to take off his halo, whirl it on his right forefinger and then, seized with a sudden idea, send it rolling along the golden pavement.

It was the first time any halo had ever been used as a hoop; thus it attracted more than a little attention as the cherub, with a stalk of asphodel for a stick, bowled it along at top speed. His little cheeks were puffed out and his eyes danced as he hurried along, crying at the top of his voice, “Clear! Clear, everybody! I’m coming!”

The cherub’s legs twinkled for—artists to the contrary—there is more to a cherub than you see above the shoulders, and shouting, “Look at me everybody! See my halo!” he skimmed unobserved past the Archangel Gabriel who, from his throne of beryl and topaz and chrysoprase, was occupied with weightier matters.

And yet halos are very important indeed in the courts of heaven. No halo is a mere decoration: it has a purpose. Any good quality in the wearer which hitherto has been hidden from others (and perhaps from the wearer himself), the halo brings out and makes plain for all to see. Moreover this effect is permanent. And though the cherubim and the seraphim are already perfect, a halo often changes for the better such of the blessed as come to Paradise battered and inhibited by a mortal existence.

But, paying no attention to protests, the cherub with a loud, "Look! See what I'm doing!" trundled his halo toward Meditation Point.

Now this is not really a "point" at all: it is a great circular hole in Heaven's floor, protected on all sides by a balustrade of jasper and amethyst. Here the more philosophic blessed sit and admire the order of the universe as it flows on its determined course beneath them.

By this time increasing speed had set the halo to bouncing, and just before it reached Meditation Point it shot into the air so high as to pass clean over the balustrade. There, its force spent, it began to glimmer down, out of Paradise into the Void.

"Hey! That's mine! Stop it, somebody!" And, without a second thought, the cherub launched himself on his ineffectual wings after the halo.

It was a preposterous thing to do and for a moment it looked as though the cherub might follow his halo down into the night below; and, if he had done this, it would have taken him at least a trillion years to find his way back unaided. Fortunately, though, a burly seraph, with a golden hook kept for just such emergencies, yanked him out just as he was being dragged down into the etheric whirlpool.

Flat on his little tummy, his head between two balusters, the cherub wept small hot tears as he watched his halo lose itself in

the infinite. First it was a golden crown; then a silver ring; and finally a tiny bright point which winked, wavered and disappeared.

Immediately in all the courts of Heaven the loss was known; the music ceased; the choirs hushed. With a sigh, for it was one of his less agreeable duties, the Archangel Gabriel left his throne of beryl and topaz and chrysoprase; and, girding up his loins, passed through the gates of pearl into the murk of the cosmic drift. And through nebulae, systems and galaxies he followed the halo to that belt of light which lies between Aquila and Centaurus.



2. HOW YE HALO CAME FROM YE MYLKIE WAYE TO YE PLANETTE EARTHE

“**M**ISS CAMERON.”

“Yes, Mr. Greer.”

“I know this is Christmas Eve and that we’re all tired, but we can’t let down now. The customers expect us to look pleasant and that’s one of the things we’re paid for.”

“Yes, Mr. Greer.”

“Try to push the toys a little harder. Not much market for such things after Christmas.”

She nodded as brightly as possible. She felt tired and, worst of all, she knew she looked tired. Sometimes she wondered whether she had ever looked or felt any other way.

“Yes, madam . . . One of the season’s best sellers. Yes, indeed; all the little boys seem to like it” . . .

The old smile now and don’t let it be any more mechanical than an alarm clock. Handsome is as handsome does . . .

“Sixty-seven cents—exactly right. I’ll have it wrapped for you . . . Thank you, madam. And Merry Christmas!” . . .

Ancient refined maiden lady smiles at customer. Not much of a smile but the best she can do. Besides—Great Galoshes! It’s Benjie! Where did Benjie come from? He mustn’t see me. I’ll-I’ll—

But it was too late. Already Benjie had seen her and with his old lurching gait and funny, awkward grin was crossing the aisle, both hands open and arms outstretched. "Hey! Laura!"

"Benjie."

"Six years hasn't changed you a bit, Laura."

She laughed a little wryly. "You ought to say that with more conviction. Anyhow I'm a business girl now, Benjie. I'm selling toys and I have to hold my job. I can't receive callers here."

"I can answer that one too," he said. "I've got nephews and nieces in this town who need toys for Christmas. How much is that sled?"

"The red one?"

"The big red one. Do you remember, Laura, when you were five and I was eight? I brought my sled to your house and I said we'd look for Santa Claus and—say!"

Benjie caught his breath suddenly, for something had happened. The cherub's halo, after drifting through outer space had settled into the layer of air about the planet Earth. Caught in a gusty current, it had swept down to the planet's surface and floated through a ventilator opening in the New Fair Department Store to perch finally on the head of the young lady at the central toy counter. There it rested, quite invisible, but radiating its peculiar power.

Though its wearer had no idea of its presence she could feel its effects. "You think you're pretty," her grandmother had repeated to her a thousand times. "Well, get that idea out of your head because you're not. Just remember that handsome is as handsome does." Now, all at once, Miss Cameron knew she was pretty and that she'd always been pretty. Without being able to explain how it was happening she became aware that her cheeks were growing redder and her eyes wider and her lips fuller. She felt as unrestricted and free-moving as a wooly caterpillar. She was a seed abruptly sprouting and

bursting into bloom. A fluffy dress hung out to dry in the sun.

"Laura," Benjie said, "Laura!"

"What is it, Benjie?"

"Laura, you're—you're beautiful."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it's true. Laura, you remember—we weren't looking for Santa Claus: that's only what we told them. You were going to get on the sled and we were going to run away together for good and always. Let's do it now."

"Don't be silly, Benjie."

"I'm not silly. This red fellow here will hold us both. I'm buying it."

"Benjie!"

"And you're going with me now."

"But I'm working here."

"You just quit."

The floorwalker came up. "Are you having any difficulty, Miss Cameron? If—" His face became fatuous. "I—I—ah—it was my intention, Miss Cameron, to say to you that each year we try to retain the best of our extras on the regular payroll. In your case, I'm sure—"

"Miss Cameron," interrupted Benjie, "is quitting. Right now and for good; just as soon as she sells me this sled."

"But she can't quit now!"

"She can't, huh? Watch her."

"You must be reasonable, Benjie."

"Reasonableness is my specialty. How much is the sled? We'll take a taxi to the top of Greenspread Hill and start from there."

Ten minutes later, as she arranged herself on the sled with the white track stretching below, he said again, "You're beautiful."



“All this is simply ridiculous, Benjie. But,” she added, “it’s sweet. You’re sweet.”

“Sweet yourself! Hold on tight now because we’re going down this hill. It’s the first of a lot of places we’re going. Ready?”

Halfway down he kissed her and the halo flew off. But by that time it didn’t matter.



3. HOW YE HALO DELICATELY CIRCLED YE HEADE OF A MISERABLE POETE



“**I** SUPPOSE,” said the engineer ruefully, “there’s no use in my drawing any more diagrams.”

She shook her head.

They sat side by side at a little table in the St. Nicholas Tavern. Before them stood a miniature lighted Christmas tree, and the panelled walls were gay with holly wreaths and chains of evergreen.

“Your poet friend calls for you; I bow politely, go to my hotel, pack my duffle and start for South America; and that ends things for us?”

“I’m afraid so, Fred.”

He looked at her imploringly, “You know, Julie, if you want to come with me, it’s not yet too late. I can fix the passport and all that in time for you to catch the boat.”

“I care for you, Fred.” She patted his hand. “Sometimes I’ve been sure I was in love with you. But I like Volney too. I like you both tremendously. But—”

“Say it.”

“Sure you want^m_A to hear?”

“Certain.”

“Well, here it is. I know I’ll never count in the big world. That’s why I’d like to spend my life helping somebody who’s doing more than just working for money. I’m sorry to say that, Fred; but you asked for it.”

The engineer nodded humbly and disconsolately. “If I’ve been working for money, another fellow must have grabbed it. But I see what you mean. I’ll admit Volney Harrop is a genius and, God knows, I’m not. Still, I wish I could make you understand what I feel.”

“Ready and waiting.”

He eyed her quizzically. “No use: I haven’t the gift. Once in California I was building a dam with a fellow who’d just point at something and grunt, and right off you’d know what he meant: a swell sunset—that two-by-four’s rotten—rain tomorrow—whoopee! But when I point and grunt it never means anything except to me.”

“Keep trying, Fred,” she smiled. “Someday—oh, here’s Volney.”

The poet came buoyantly into the dining room. He was tall and straight and quite as he should be except for those who prefer their poets starved. His clothes were well tailored and his hair was short.

“Isn’t this a glorious day,” he exulted, after the introduction was over and cocktails had been ordered. “Julie, do you know what happened to my *Black Star*? Fenniman, the big composer, is setting it to music and he says it’s a sure bet for the Metropolitan next season.”

“I’m so glad, Volney.”

“It may come to nothing; but just to have Fenniman touch it is an honor. Besides my board bill is paid. This year I’ve made almost twenty thousand through royalties and lecturing; and did I tell you that my *American Saga* has been bought

by Hollywood? Five thousand. It ought to have been more but I'm still grateful." He turned to the engineer. "I'm afraid I've been tooting my own horn too loud. You should have stopped me."

The engineer protested. "There's nothing in the world more interesting than shop talk. Just how would you describe your work?"

The poet frowned. "Don't think I'm trying to be highbrow; I'm not. But I tell myself that I use words to chart the complexities of the human soul. With words I catch the invisible and the impalpable in a net. With words I give body to something that's a dream today but will be real tomorrow." He took a deep breath. "With that over, Mr. Ackord—I beg your pardon—Mr. Archer, suppose I should ask you to explain your *metier*, how would you go about it?"

"Engineering? Why—"

The engineer was clearing his throat and fumbling with the ash tray, when the door of the St. Nicholas Tavern opened and, borne on a gust of wind, the halo wafted into the dining room.

"Why—the business of an engineer is—um—"

Under the table Julie twisted her hands in an agony of suspense waiting for the words that refused to come. The halo rose to the ceiling.

"Engineering is a job—that is—well, of course the first thing is to find out what has to be done. Then you decide how you're going to do it. Then—"

At that moment the halo settled on his head.

To Julie the engineer's halting words seemed suddenly lost in the assured throb of a deep-voiced organ. Or was it an organ? Was it music at all? Wasn't it rather a poem—a strange sort of unspoken poem made of cerebral electricity rather than of words and rhymes and meters. And, as Julie's hands clenched, she interpreted it for herself.



We go first: you others—you come after us.

It's our bones mark the trail.

*We die of fevers and of arrows and of gunshot
and of gross accidents and earth catastrophes;
but that doesn't matter because always our younger brothers
come after us to carry on the job till it's done.*

And it's always done.

*For sweatshop wages we create civilization;
yet every time we finish a job—build a road or a bridge
or cut through a mountain or what-have-you,
we're thanked by having the job fold up under us;
and we have to hunt another. That's our pay-day.*

What do you think we're trying to do?

*Do you suppose this shoveling, hammering, blasting, sweating,
means nothing to us but something to eat and a place to sleep?*

Listen! We're rebuilding the world.

Give us a chance and we'll tame the universe.

Julie stared at the engineer who caught her eye and began stammering.

“That is—what I’m trying to say is—something has to be done and first you want to make sure just what that is. Well—”

“Headache,” announced Julie, standing up. “Volney, I’m afraid you’ll have to go to that dinner alone. Fred will take me home.”

Outside the tavern the engineer asked plaintively, “Did—did I say something—or—”

“Of course you said something. You said a great deal. And the only two questions we have to settle now are: shall we be married tomorrow or tonight? And are you sure about the passport?”

In a mist of snowflakes the halo floated on down the street.





4. HOW YE HALO LYTTE ONNE A STUFFED SHIRTE AND YE STRANGE RESULTE THEREOF



MR. BELMORE had two cars and a chauffeur, but now he was walking to work up an appetite for a Christmas Eve dinner. Passing along High Street he regarded that part of the human race then on parade and lumped them as usual under the one classification: "Cattle! . . . No other word for 'em . . . Cattle!"

He had reached the crest of High Street Hill and was on his way toward the bridge below, where the grey, unfrozen water reflected the shore lights, when a small boy, sliding down the snowy walk on his own two soles, skidded. There was a collision.

As Mr. Belmore felt his silk hat leave his head and his anatomy thump down on the hard packed snow, he said again, "Cattle!" That is, he started to say it; but the word died in his throat. Something had happened. He felt himself in the grip of a sensation which he knew he had experienced before but which now presented itself with a disconcerting newness.

The small boy was sitting up, rubbing one knee and smiling uncertainly. "I—I guess I slid."

"Slid!" Mr. Belmore had intended saying this with the

harshest of emphasis; thus he was surprised to find the words pronounced with a playful inflection.

Scrambling to his feet the small boy reached out his hand. "Can I help you up, mister? I'm purty strong."

Mr. Belmore did his best to snap out a final, devastating, "Cattle!" To his surprise he said nothing of the kind. He smiled; gripped the little hand; accepted the proffered silk hat; and fumbled in his pocket. "Here, young man. Merry Christmas! Hang onto it."

"But—but say, mister, that's five dollars you gimme. Gee!"

"Can't you use five dollars?"

"Well, sure, only—gee, mister! Thanks a lot. Merry Christmas! Gee!"

The boy turned back to the top of the hill. There he stopped, waved and once more shouted Merry Christmas.

Resuming his progress toward the bridge, Mr. Belmore tried to call himself to order.

Young whelps like that—what's evolution doing?—no business keeping that sort of people alive . . . Starvelings . . . Let 'em die out and a good thing for everybody. Ought to be against the law to show sympathy for cattle. Of course there are people in the world who count. That's different. I've got along in the world by cultivating the right sort.

Mr. Belmore's sentiments were altogether logical; indeed for years they had been the backbone of his working philosophy. And he would have had no trouble in believing them now, if it had not been for a most unusual occurrence. After leaving the engineer's head the halo had blown about aimlessly for awhile, though drifting in the general direction of the river; and when Mr. Belmore's hat had been tossed into a snowdrift the halo had promptly settled down around his bald spot.

Thus, as he continued toward the bridge he found his indignation becoming purely theoretical, which is about zero in indignations.



Police ought to take care of those young hoodlums . . . Looked like one of the Davidson kids lived next door to us . . . Poor . . . Well, we were all poor. But I liked them and they liked me . . . Guess I liked everybody . . . But you've got to choke off that sappy sentimentality if you want to get on in the world . . . People may have quit liking me but they respect me; and—

He woke to the fact that he was being halted. "I beg your pardon, madam?"

"I was just wondering if you'd carry these parcels for me to the bus. With this baby on my arm I'm afraid I can't manage all of them . . . Thanks a lot and Merry Christmas."

He walked on in a daze.

That woman picked me out of six others and asked me to make a packhorse of myself because she liked me. Of course—

He caught himself beaming and smiling at a father with four children; all four loaded with packages and walking Indian file. The father beamed and smiled back.

. . . Believe it or not, I spoke first. Wished him a Merry Christmas and I don't know him from Adam's off ox. Must be something in the atmosphere . . . Sunspots . . . Aurora borealis . . . Anyhow when a two hundred pounder like me begins to feel as light and airy as I do right now, he'd better see a psychiatrist. Is this thing going to keep up?

It kept up. Everybody he passed seemed to take a pleasure in greeting him, and he in responding to their greetings. He knew none of them and they did not know him; but he felt enveloped in a far-reaching friendliness.

Got rid of this nonsense when I was a kid and here it's back again worse than ever. Worst of it is I rather think I like 'em—and what's the percentage in liking cattle?

But he pronounced "cattle" with a difference.

Meanwhile the greetings continued. It was like a royal progress. "Merry Christmas, mister . . . Nice Christmas weather we're having . . . How's this for a white Christmas . . . Merry Christmas."

He was thinking, much against his will, how good it was to be alive and to have people like you and to like them in turn, when from the end of the bridge came a confused shouting. Of course it was none of his business but somehow he began to feel

vaguely worried, for down below something was happening to somebody.

“Mister! Mister!” It was a white-faced youngster with tears rolling down his cheeks. He ran directly to Mr. Belmore. “It’s my brother—he’s fallen in the river. Get him out, mister! Oh, get him out!”

Clustered about the railing a group of grownups peered down into the sluggish gray depths where a white face glimmered and two arms splashed futilely. The group was generous with its advice. “Swim, kid, swim . . . Hurry up with that boat down there . . . Tread water, kid . . . Don’t give up . . . Down he goes again . . .”

Strangely enough Mr. Belmore found he was not even hesitating. With a swing of his arms he cast off the fur-lined ulster and the evening coat beneath and the top hat. He would have got rid of his shoes, but time was too precious. And, the halo still circling his bald spot, he dived down twenty feet below to the icy gray river.

Gotta keep the old pump going . . . I’ll say I touched bottom that time . . . Now for some air . . . Good old pump . . . And where’s that kid?

He was at the surface again, blowing water from mouth and nostrils, looking for the boy somewhere in the gray flood.

Ought to be right about here . . . Ah—got him! . . . Now, then . . . Good thing I’ve been swimming at the Athletic Club three times a week . . . Just the same this is different.


He did not fully realize how different it was till, with his burden, he started for the boat which was only now pushing from the shore.

Cold as a bowl of punch . . . But I’ll get there . . . Ten more strokes and make ’em big ones . . . Boat’s almost here . . . Now ten more . . . Too many cocktails—that’s my trouble . . . But I’ll boost the kid over the side of that boat . . . I will . . . I will.


His heart held to the last and he had helped lift the little body over the gunwale before he understood that the dinner party would have to go on without him. Then he let go and, with arms and legs churning feebly, felt the waters close over his head.

Glad I did it—but why? Why do it? . . . Not my style . . . Something must have happened to make me do it—but what? . . .





5. HOW YE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL FOUND THATTE WHICHE WAS LOSTE AND WHAT ENSEWED THEREFROM



THE Archangel Gabriel was very tired, for he had travelled through all the drift of the universe and the black dust clouds of space to the little planet known as the Earth. And when finally he found the halo he was little less disconsolate than when he had been tracking it through the powdered brilliance of the constellations.

It is a splendid thing to bring a lost halo back to Paradise; for the greeting and welcome are such as the mind of man cannot conceive. First to be heard are the faint tinklings of zitterns and psalteries; then the deeper notes of the great harps; and finally, as the Archangel passes Heaven's gate, the trumpets sound and all the indescribable harmonies of Paradise mount in a crescendo of triumph.

But bringing back the halo is no simple matter. Once it reaches the planet Earth, it is bound there till, for at least a moment, it comes to rest on the head of a most exceptional person. This individual must be one who has not buried any virtuous talent, but has let all his goodness, all his admirable

qualities shine out from him in a continuous blaze of glory. And this sort of person is rare indeed.

Twice before the Archangel Gabriel had brought halos back from Earth to Paradise. The first, after many peregrinations, had, in the end, circled the bald crown of a philosopher who actually lived up to his philosophy; the second halo had come to rest on the head of a peasant girl who was being burned at the stake in a French market place.

"Assuming," said the Archangel, "that this halo circulates like the others at the average rate of ten individuals an hour, two hundred forty a day, and a trifle less than ninety thousand a year, I shall be earthbound myself for something like fifty-eight years, seven months, sixteen days, eight hours and twenty minutes—that is, if my two former experiences are typical." He shrugged his shoulders. "Well, nothing to do but wait. Patience."

But he did not look forward to his waiting with any particular pleasure. Though to the celestial host a hundred years are as a day, this holds good only so long as they remain in the heavenly precincts. Once they enter the terrestrial atmosphere time passes for them much as it does for the rest of us; and, indeed, even more slowly. For they are truly anxious to leave this planet of ours and we, no matter how we may protest, are usually quite willing to linger a bit.

"The present wearer of the halo," said the Archangel Gabriel, as he looked about the plain, scrubbed kitchen, "isn't what you'd call especially promising. She's cheerful, though maybe the halo's responsible for that . . . Poor as a church mouse. The stuff in that dress is worn out and she's wearing pasteboard insoles. Swollen hands. Pains in the back. A job and her family to care for. She works too hard."

The Archangel studied the situation. The woman with the halo was far from prepossessing. She was rather on the dumpy



order and her only claim to good looks lay in her smile, which was charming enough. She was engaged in the serious business of trimming a small Christmas tree set on the table. Every now and then she sat down, closed her eyes, took a long breath and then, after a little, smiled again.

The Archangel frowned and made a second survey of the

room, which was not only the kitchen but obviously the center of the family's life.

"Six stockings behind the stove. Three boys and three girls. Let's keep on and see what we find."

In a trice he had passed through the nearest closed door. It was a bedroom; in the large bed lay two small boys; and, on a cot, a youngster of twelve.

"It's altogether improbable," said the Archangel to himself, "that this mother in the kitchen is the one human being in several million who doesn't need a halo. It's against all logic; it's as good as impossible. Still, in justice to myself, I must make sure."

Bending over, he passed his hand across the boy's forehead and the eyelids winked open.

"Who are you?" the boy demanded.

"I am a friend of the family," said the Archangel. "Indeed, I'm a friend of the whole Human Family. I was present when the family came and I shall be with them when they go."

"Don't talk so loud: you'll scare my mother."

"Your mother cannot hear us because we are not using spoken words; it is your mind only which hears and speaks." He pointed his right forefinger at the door; it immediately became transparent. In the kitchen the woman had finished trimming the tree and was beginning to mix batter for a cake.

"I can see my mother."

"Exactly," said the Archangel, "and how changed she is! How good-humored! It's probably the effect of Christmas."

"My mother's always that way."

"Oh, perhaps, to some extent. But you'll admit that the last day or so she's been far more cheerful."

"She's always cheerful."

"Of course, when you're around. But when she's by herself I'm sure she's quite different."

The boy pointed. "Look at her now, because she don't

know we're watchin'. See—she's spilled the raisins and she's pickin' 'em up to wash 'em again. It hurts her to bend over. But she's smiling—see?"

The Archangel frowned. "It just happened that way."

"No, it didn't just happen. She's always like that."

"Always like that with the six of you?"

"Sure, with the six of us. Why not? When my father died—that was the same year Dick was born—she said to us, 'Now you must never let me fail you—never!' But we didn't have to remind her. Sometimes she don't eat enough because she makes us eat first. Sometimes when she gets up in the morning she's so tired that—" He cocked his head suddenly. "Say, your face is sort of shining, isn't it? And what's that music? Is it from the radio next door?"

The Archangel's face was shining as he smiled gravely and said, "No, that music comes from much farther than any radio can reach."

"That music—it's beautiful." And beautiful it was. It had begun faintly but now it was swelling to an exultant thunder. "It sounds as though the people playing it were glad."

"They are very glad."

"What are they glad about?"

"There are two reasons," said the Archangel, "and the lesser one is because that which was lost has been found."

As he raised his right hand the door once more became opaque and the boy dropped back into his quiet sleep.

And with the halo the Archangel Gabriel went back to Paradise.





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